DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 065 018 FL 003 478

AUTHOR Kelly, Joseph G.
TITLE Liberal Education, the Language Requirement and the Audio-Lingual Method.
INSTITUTION Kansas State Univ., Wichita.
PUB DATE Apr 70
NOTE 5p.
JOURNAL CIT Wichita State University Foreign Language Summary; v5 n1 p2-6 Apr 1970

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Audiolingual Methods; Core Courses; *Language Instruction; *Language Programs; Modern Language Curriculum; *Modern Languages; *Relevance (Education); Second Language Learning; Student Motivation; Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The author suggests that educators must (1) realistically assess the ways in which language study can and cannot contribute significantly to the student's overall educational experience and devise new methods which consciously stress goals attainable within the available time period, (2) provide more than one kind of introductory course, and (3) allow the student himself to decide on which aspects of the language he wishes to concentrate. Several basic "justifications" of college language programs are also critically examined. (Author/RL)

ED 065018

From: Wichita State University Foreign Language Summary; v5 n1 April 1970.

Liberal Education, the Language Requirement and the Audio-Lingual Method

A recent survey of Liberal Arts students at WSU indicates that the foreign language requirement ranks second only to the mathematics requirement in unpopularity. Since the fifteen hours claimed by language study represent, for many students, the largest single requirement outside the major field, we must seriously ask ourselves whether the results achieved justify the expenditure of effort demanded, or whether the students may not be correct in considering the requirement a form of gratuitous harassment.

The following statement is taken from the WSU Catalog: "In a very real sense, a liberal education is a liberating experience, for through its processes and methods, one discovers the key for opening the doors to exciting new discoveries throughout his life - he is freed from the limits of his past and invigorated by the potential of his future."(1) The relevance of foreign language study to this ideal can be defended from at least three points of view. The most traditional of these asserts that mastery of another language makes possible a deeper understanding and appreciation of some of the highest achievements of human (in effect Western) civilization. To persons justifying language study in this way, it is self-evident that the languages most worthy of study are those possessing a major literary tradition; the study of grammar, which must occupy most of the early stages of instruction, is generally seen as a necessary evil.

The second defense of language study is based on the claim that the ability to communicate with representatives of another culture gives a perspective on one's own culture, thus promoting tolerance and international understanding. Here the choice of a specific language would be made more in terms of geographical proximity or the political and economic importance of a particular nation. I suspect that this argument is more a result than a cause of the shift in emphasis in language instruction from the written to the spoken language.

The third justification, not often explicitly stated, concerns the nature of language itself. In the words of Edward Sapir, "It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation."(2) If language filters reality, and different languages do so in different ways, then the study of how another language functions should help to "liberate" the student from his naive, unconscious assumption that the structure of his own language is identical with the structure of reality. In this view, the value of language study is largely independent of whether anything worth remembering has ever been said or written in the particular language under consideration. In fact, it could be argued that a language totally unrelated to English (say, Eskimo or Hottentot) would accomplish the goal better than the familiar Western European Languages.

Clearly, these are not three distinct and independent ways of approaching language study; rather, they imply differences of emphasis which will inevitably influence our methods of instruction. I see no reason to consider any one of them intrinsically superior to the others. However, when we move from generalities to the actual situation prevailing at WSU (and most other universities), it should be clear that the three goals are not equally feasible.

ED 065018 FL 003 947

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The key word in the argument from literature is "mastery". While it is undoubtedly true that virtually all literary works lose something in translation, they lose even more by being read in a language which the reader only half understands. If the time ever comes when we can assume that every entering student has completed at least four years of language study in the schools, perhaps we can hope to develop his competence to the point where he can benefit more from reading a work of foreign literature in the original than from reading it in a good English translation. Until then, this goal is completely utopian.

The validity of the "cultural" argument depends on the assumption that the student will in fact have extensive opportunity to communicate in the foreign language; in effect, it depends on assuming that he will have an extended period of stay in a country where the language is spoken. But this assumption is clearly false for the majority of students. It is often asserted that in the modern world every educated person will need to speak a foreign language at some time in his life. Perhaps so, but it will in most cases be a coincidence if the language needed turns out to be the one that was studied in college.

The "linguistic" argument differs from the other two in that the benefits it claims for language study do not depend on any assumption about what the student will do after completing his requirement, but can be realized during the period of instruction itself. Everyone has to deal with reality, in part by talking about it, and if the study of a foreign language can help the student to recognize what is arbitrary in his own language, then it will have served its purpose, whether the foreign language itself is remembered or not. I think we must conclude that this is our only justification for continuing to demand that all Liberal Arts students study a foreign language.

But we must not forget that there are also students who desire (or whose major department desires) competence in a foreign language for purely utilitarian purposes. Thus, many students plan a year of study abroad; the Chemistry department wants its students to have a reading knowledge of German; voice majors need to be able to pronounce several languages, etc. The needs of these students must also be taken into consideration in planning the language curriculum.

Now let us turn to our teaching methods and materials and try to evaluate them in terms of these considerations. There is virtually unanimous agreement that language teaching has improved enormously in the past twenty-five years. Test after test has shown that students attain greater proficiency in both the spoken and the written language than was the case with the older "grammar and translation" methods. The approach which prevails in textbooks and classrooms today has grown out of the attitudes towards language held by most American linguists in the 1940's and 1950's, and especially out of the phenomenally successful application of these ideas in intensive courses developed by the army during World War II (it is important to remember that the goals of these courses were completely practical). William G. Moulton, one of the leaders in developing the new methods, traces them to the following five postulates:

I. Language is speech, not writing.
II. A language is a set of habits.
III. Teach the language, not about the language.
IV. A language is what its native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say.
V. Languages are different.(3)

I believe that these assumptions, taken together, form an accurate statement of

the principles underlying most language textbooks and teaching methods courses today. I shall now try to show how some of their implications affect the attainment of the goals discussed above.

The attempt to make language study a "liberating" experience could be formulated as the project of elucidating the implications of postulate V. But postulates II and III make it very difficult to do so. To take a single example: The German verb "gefallen" (like French "plaire" or Spanish "gustar") has as its subject the noun or pronoun which is the object of its closest English equivalent "like", and vice versa. This might be seen as an opportunity to discuss the fact that it is in general by no means self-evident which of the two participants in an interaction is to be viewed as the "performer" and which as the "receiver"; we might even go so far as to draw on examples from other, more radically different language structures and point out that the subject-predicate dichotomy itself is an artifact of language and not to be found in nature. But postulates II and III forbid us to do so; talking about the construction will not help the student to master it, since language is a matter of habit, not understanding. So we simply label the construction an "idiom" and drill the students in its use until they can produce the proper response on cue. I do not wish to deny that the latter method will produce greater proficiency in the use of the construction. What I am contending is that if we take seriously the goal of making language study contribute to a general education, then proficiency (which in most cases will never be used anyway) is not the relevant yardstick with which to measure our success. The point is that the student's implicit assumption that the English structural pattern is a straightforward reproduction of the objective situation has remained unchallenged. It may be argued that discussions of the type I am suggesting are much more fruitful if carried out <u>after</u> the student has acquired considerable proficiency in another language. This is undoubtedly true, but the fact is that only the most exceptional students reach this proficiency within the time allotted to language study.

Courses taken to meet liberal education requirements in other fields are not generally justified on the basis of the practical working proficiency they confer. A core curriculum course in anthropology, for example, is not supposed to make the student a practicing anthropologist; rather, one attempts to show the student that anthropology can make an important contribution to his understanding of the world, to give him a general view of what there is to be learned in the field, and to orient him to the most fruitful way of going about learning it. I see no reason to suppose that the goals of language instruction should be different. But our methods are counter-productive of these goals. The belief that the student must begin speaking the foreign language immediately means that in the early stages of instruction we must concentrate on the similarities rather than the differences between English and the target language. The "hard" parts of the language (i.e. those that differ most from English and therefore have the greatest educational value) are put off to the end of the book or memorized piecemeal as "idioms". No attempt is made to give the student a general view of the ways in which languages may differ from each other, or of how to cope with a new learning problem. Thus, the fact that "gefallen", far from being an isolated aberration, is an especially illuminating example of one of the most basic and pervasive structural differences between German and English, is never allowed to come to light. The result is that every new problem faced by the student is <u>totally</u> new to him, and at the end of his period of formal instruction he has acquired no "learning skills" on the basis of which he could continue expanding his mastery of the language or begin learning another, should the occasion to do so arise. I do not believe that we can justify forcing every student to devote one-eighth of his undergraduate curriculum to this kind of instruction.

Nor do our methods fare much better when we consider the students who are studying a language for purely practical reasons. Here the principal offender is postulate V. While there can be no doubt that language is, indeed, primarily speech and only secondarily writing, it does not follow that the proper introductory course for everybody is one which stresses speaking ability. Most students who expect to use a foreign language expect only to read it (this is overwhelmingly true in the case of German, with which I am most familiar; I am sure that it also applies, though perhaps to a lesser extent, to the Romance languages). But the development of reading ability is severely retarded by textbooks and classroom procedures which introduce new material only as rapidly as it can be assimilated through oral drill, and deal primarily with subject matter which is useful only if one visits the foreign country. Thus the student who takes German so that he can read chemistry texts finds at the end of his fifteen hours that he has fallen between two chairs; he can neither converse comfortably in German nor read German chemistry texts. Yet the latter goal could well have been achieved within the fifteen-hour period if a course sequence had been available which, from the very beginning, had concentrated exclusively on reading.

I am not suggesting that we return to the methods of instruction which prevailed before World War II, nor that we discontinue courses stressing the spoken language. What I am suggesting is that we must (a) realistically assess the ways in which language study can and cannot contribute significantly to the student's overall educational experience and devise new methods which consciously stress goals attainable within the available time period; and (b) provide more than one kind of introductory course, and allow the student himself (or his major department) to decide which aspects of the language he wishes to concentrate on. There are various ways in which such a program might be designed. I will suggest only one: We might have a course with some such title as "Problems and Methods of Foreign Language Learning"; which would attempt, by drawing on examples from a wide variety of language structures, to develop a more enlightened view of language in general and equip the student to intelligently attack the problem of learning a particular language. This would be the only course required of all Liberal Arts students, and would be a prerequisite for all introductory courses in a specific language. Requirements for the latter courses would be set by the student's major department. There would be at least two kinds of first-year courses: one more or less like those we currently offer, and one concentrating entirely on reading (I suspect that there would be very little demand for courses dealing only with conversational skills). No later than the beginning of the second year, the student should be able to choose the type of material he wishes to read; for example, a third-semester course might have a literature section, a science section and a journalism section. There would also be literature-in-translation courses, in which the student could read more and understand it better than by trying to read it in the original before he is linguistically prepared to do so.

As the scope of the present paper does not allow a more detailed discussion of the criticisms and suggestions I have offered, I will close by recommending a few readings. For an (undoubtedly overstated) exposition of the ways in which language structure can affect thought and perception, see Benjamin Lee Whorf's essay, "Science and Linguistics".(4) For a cogent argument that Moulton's postulate II (probably the most influential of the five in determining our present methods) is false, empirically as well as pedagogically, see Noam Chomsky's review of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior.(5) For an example (the only one with which I am familiar) of an elementary textbook which attempts to encourage and orient, rather than suppress, the student's conscious thinking about language, see Walter

F. Pattison's College Spanish - a New Departure.(6) And for some speculations about how a particular language skill (in this case reading) might be taught more efficiently for utilitarian purposes, see Robbins Burling's article, "Some Outlandish Proposals for the Teaching of Foreign Languages".(7)

References

1. Wichita State University Catalog, 1969-1970, p. 107.

2. "The Status of Linguistics as a Science", in David G. Mandelbaum (ed.), Selected Writings of Edward Sapir, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963, p. 162.

3. "Linguistics and Language Teaching in the United States 1940-1960", in Mohrmann, Sommerfelt and Whatmough (eds.), Trends in European and American Linguistics 1930-1960, Utrecht, 1961, pp. 82-109.

4. John B. Carroll (ed.), Language, Thought and Reality. Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, Cambridge, 1956, pp. 207-219.

5. Language, 35 (1959), pp. 26-58.

6. New York, Oxford University Press, 1960.

7. Language Learning, XVIII (1968), pp. 61-75.

Joseph G. Kelly
Assistant Professor of German, W.S.U.